

# THE BURROWS CAVE

## AFRICAN GOLD IN ILLINOIS?

***A cave that Russell Burrows claims to have discovered in 1982 allegedly contained inscribed gold and stone artefacts, human remains and a golden sarcophagus that has been linked to the Mauritanian king Juba II.***

**by Philip Coppens © 2006**

PO Box 13722  
North Berwick EH39 4WB  
United Kingdom

Email:  
info@philipcoppens.com  
Website:  
<http://www.philipcoppens.com>

*The story of the Burrows Cave is more about human behaviour than archaeology. It is the story of an alleged cave containing the tomb of an African king who reached North America in the 1st century AD—and the subsequent controversy that the artefacts created.*

— Philip Coppens

Every discovery has its dangers. In version one of our story, Russell Burrows accidentally discovered a cave along a branch of the Little Wabash River near his home town of Olney, Illinois, USA, in 1982. Hunting for discarded archaeological relics, he found a shallow cave leading into a subterranean corridor, the likes of which you'd not expect to find in rural Illinois. The passageway was lined with oil lamps, the ceiling black from smoke. The 500-foot-long tunnel had several chambers along it—but what it contained, Burrows was unwilling to divulge. In version two, in 1982 Burrows created a hoax: claiming to have discovered a tomb, he then tried to sell faked stone artefacts of his own making, which he'd copied from various books.

The so-called Burrows Cave is famous for its large numbers of inscribed stones, often containing profiles of people who look African, Egyptian and European as well as Native American. On first sight they look crude: the work of an amateur or someone meeting an imminent deadline. Furthermore, preliminary analyses of the writing on the stones revealed a mix, if not a mismatch, of various styles, words and languages that archaeologists and linguists quickly labelled as "obviously fake" ("obvious" being a preferred word that scientists use to underline what they can easily, *obviously*, see is fake, though amateurs are fooled by it, *obviously*).

As early as 1983, Burrows did place a very small collection of the artefacts on sale in a local antique shop—but if he created the entire collection, it is clear he created so many that he could never have got rid of them all. Moreover, it was not until 1997 that he or anyone else would "cash in" on the stones themselves. If Burrows wanted to get rich from creating fake artefacts, his hoax was obviously ill executed.

But the cave is more than just a collection of inscribed stones. Burrows allegedly found and removed many gold artefacts. These look genuine and contain the same mismatch of writing. You can only wonder why a fraud, if Burrows were indeed one, would use gold—which, to begin with, is costly to obtain.

It is true that there are conflicting stories about this gold. Burrows at one point stated that some of the gold had been melted down and then sold. The Swiss author Luc Bürkin claimed that Burrows removed huge quantities of gold, had it melted down and then sold it, depositing a grand total of US\$15 million into Swiss bank accounts. If true, this indicates that Burrows did indeed get his hands on tremendous amounts of gold and decided to sell for the gold's monetary value—not the archaeological value. But others have stated that Bürkin was merely told this "information" by a fellow researcher and possesses no evidence for his assertion.

Some sceptics claim that the "gold" never existed, that it has never been seen. That's not true, because early researchers *did* see it. I have been shown colour photographs of apparently gold artefacts by Burrows himself; I still have some of these photos in my possession, and they are available for viewing on my website. Other critics argue that the "gold" was just metal, finished off with gold paint to make it look real. If they are correct, then Burrows merely created these artefacts to fool archaeologists, amateur

scientists and the media and he could never allow any direct contact with or testing of the artefacts. It would also mean that he could never have regarded the "gold" artefacts as part of a quick money-making scheme. In short, this conclusion is incompatible with the other sceptics' argument, which is that Burrows tried to make money from a hoax.

### The Golden Sarcophagus and Human Remains

If the story is genuine, Burrows discovered a human skeleton—a male—in the first crypt. The second chamber had a funeral bier with the remains of a woman and two children. A golden spearhead lay in the woman's ribs, where the heart would have been. The skulls of the children showed signs of perforation. The scene suggested that the woman and children had been murdered at the time when the male, her husband, died.

In total, there were 12 crypts. The central chamber, containing the golden sarcophagus, was closed by a stone that had to be rolled away. The room, including the ceiling, was decorated and white marble was seen throughout. The golden sarcophagus inside the stone tomb resembled the ancient Egyptian form of burial: it displayed the same style of wearing the hair as well as the crossed arms on the body, and the hands were holding the ankh symbol. It is said that Burrows was able to prise open the sarcophagus and note that it seemed to contain human remains as well as a death mask, also thought to be of Egyptian origin.

Although the sarcophagus was of tremendous value—to be compared with the golden sarcophagus of Tutankhamun—it could not be removed from the cave by just Burrows with the help of his brother-in-law. Furthermore, Burrows was unsure as to whether he might face prosecution if he disturbed the human remains he'd found in the cave or if he tried to sell any of its contents. The sceptics seldom address this part of the story, as they claim that there never was a cave at all, and hence no sarcophagus, and hence no human skeleton inside.

### Reactions to the Discovery

Let us assume that the cave exists, and see how far we can follow Burrows into it. His situation was extremely complex: he was totally unprepared for such a find (who wouldn't be?), and his volatile character did not help in a situation where patience is a virtue.

On 27 July 1984, the local *Olney Daily Mail* ran a small article identifying Burrows as the



Gold artefacts (above and below) from the cave, showing Egyptian or Egyptian inspired marks on the gold. © Russell Burrows

discoverer of a local cave, but provided little more except for this hope: "...the university [with which he was in contact] will probably begin the dig next year. At that time, more information can be given."

Though Burrows sought help from the scientific world, he received mixed reactions from it. Soon afterwards, one "amateur archaeologist" after another pressed his doorbell. Each one almost immediately asked to see the cave. It's like a person in a plaster cast getting constantly asked whether someone can see or sign his/her plaster; at some point the answer will be "no", because it feels as if no one is interested in you but only in your plaster. For Burrows, it felt like all they wanted was to see the cave; they had no basic respect or regard for his own

wishes, often not even bothering to ask about them. People such as these came away disappointed, hurt because Burrows did not want to play their game, and they often voiced scathing opinions. Some even considered Burrows's presence incidental.

One attempt to commercialise the cave occurred in 1994 when Harry Hubbard and Paul Kelly claimed the ancient alphabets on the stones to be a combination of Latin and Etruscan. The inscriptions revealed, they claimed, that the tomb of Alexander the Great was buried in Illinois. What made Hubbard and Kelly stand out from competing theorists was their Jack Russell-type attacks on anyone who disagreed with them. They have also been described as appearing "to spend the majority of their time seeking investors and peddling home-made videotapes".

They did not need Burrows; they were going to locate the tomb themselves. They are typical examples in a long line of people who have tried to use the cave for their own financial benefit, for

fame or to confirm their pet theory—and most often all three mixed into one lethal cocktail.

In the "pet theory" category was Joseph P. Mahan, author of the 1983 book *The Secret*, who suggested in a 1991 lecture that the cave was connected with "sun-related semi-divine mortals [who] were the descendants of extraterrestrial immortal progenitors who had come to Earth in fire ships, had resided for a while [and] had upgraded the humanoids they found here by modifying the genes of these children of Earth, thus producing a hybrid progeny". Such a nonsensical conclusion is not based on anything at all that Burrows ever said about the case, but it is clear that it rubbed off badly on Burrows's image and the cave.



Another example of how the cave became a hostage in other people's battles is the story of Richard Flavin, who used the cave to persecute Frank Joseph. For more than 15 years, Joseph had nothing to do with the story until, in his position as a writer for *The Ancient American* magazine, he became interested and eventually wrote a book about it (*The Lost Treasure of King Juba*; Bear & Co., 2003).

But Flavin instead focused on Joseph's past as a neo-Nazi (dating back to the early 1970s) and uses this as ammunition to "prove" that anyone suggesting the cave could be real is hence a neo-Nazi. Flavin met Burrows on a few occasions, but his interpretation of events is spurious at best and his account reads more like that of a Christian missionary in the lands of the "primitives" or a communist witch-hunter of the 1950s than a scientific approach to the subject (see <http://www.flavinscorner.com/falling.htm>).

In the final analysis, the story of the Burrows Cave is typical for a finding of this nature. Just look at other similar discoveries and replace the names; the general storyline would hardly alter. The same basic stand-off is here, with the scientific experts quick to condemn the artefacts they were shown as "obvious forgeries". By default, the artefacts could not be genuine, for we all "know" that Columbus was the first to reach America.

When it came to the amateurs, Burrows was unprepared for and unaware of the amount of in-fighting and controversy that exists in most amateur organisations—though communities such as those interested in UFOs, the mystery of Rennes-le-Château and crop circles have so far easily outperformed anything that the "diffusionists" (those researching anomalous evidence in the New World, suggestive of transoceanic contacts) have been capable of. Burrows had thrown out a giant bone and the dogs were fighting over it. In the process, he was eaten—and so was his story.

### Ground-Penetrating Radar Tests

Unfortunately, Russell Burrows's personal disillusionment led him to dynamite the entrance to the cave. He reportedly did this in 1989, three years before his co-written book *The Mystery Cave of Many Faces* was published (with Fred Rydholm; Marquette, 1992). It's an extremely level-headed account of his discovery of the cave and the artefacts inside—and something that he



Gold artefact from the cave, clearly showing Egyptian or Egyptian-inspired marks on the gold. © Russell Burrows

considered to be his final word on the topic.

But though Burrows often claimed to have lost interest in his discovery (largely due to the difficult people he had to deal with), he still returned to it, like to an old flame.

The fact that he could not let go, even though there was nothing in it for him any more, should perhaps be seen as the best evidence that Burrows had indeed made a legitimate discovery. For if this discovery had started as a money-making scheme in 1982, by 1992 he had long abandoned such hope.

But the story did not die. In 1993, diffusionist thinkers now had a new magazine to turn to, *The Ancient American*, which over the course of the subsequent decade continued to follow the story of the cave. In 1999, the magazine's founder/publisher Wayne May decided that if no one else could bring about a change in the situation, he would do so himself.



Stone found outside the Burrows Cave, showing an apparently African face. © Russell Burrows

Having reported on the subject for the previous six years, spoken to the man and heard him out, May got Burrows to sign a contract and to disclose and show him the location of the cave—despite his initial belief that Burrows had lied about the location and had actually laid a false trail.

I have to say that, from my personal dealings with Burrows in 1992 and 1993, I found him to be a man of honour. If he promised something, he would do it (cue for the critics to laugh at what they will see is my "obvious" gullibility). And that, it seems, is what May felt as well.

So, despite his initial reluctance to believe, May finally knew the location and persevered with his investigations. His ground-penetrating radar indicated that "a cave" was indeed there. The problem was how to get in, considering that Burrows's explosion a decade earlier had destroyed the entrance. Unfortunately, it soon became evident that the explosion had not only blocked the entrance but had also damaged the

interior of the tunnel.

During May's various attempts to gain access, each time he stumbled upon huge quantities of water. This seemed to indicate that the explosion had diverted the flow of an underground river and as a result had caused water to gush into the underground complex. It therefore looked like salvaging anything from the underground complex would be terribly complex—and largely outside May's capabilities.

## Sceptics versus Truth-seekers

In a nutshell, this is a nearly 25-year-long story that has left hardly anyone who has looked into it untouched or without an opinion. It is all too easy to label Burrows a hoaxer. People who have known and worked with him have called him many things, but not a fabricator of evidence or a liar. He has an explosive nature on occasions and has sometimes not been the best judge of character. But Burrows's character flaws are largely incidental in this narrative. Only his sceptics focus too heavily on them, whereas they should be focusing instead on whether or not he could actually have fabricated any, let alone such huge numbers of, inscribed stones.

If we were placed in the same situation, the end result would be the same, for it is in the nature of such discoveries and how we react to them that they tend to produce the same kind of outcomes. The sceptics would call it an "obvious hoax" and the proponents would call it "clear evidence", finally proving their respective arguments, whatever they may be.

So, the fate of the cave was sealed, doomed, from the moment that Burrows slid down into it.

Where does this leave us? For sceptics to cry foul, they need to come up with better than "obvious" statements. There is no evidence that Burrows faked the stones. The sceptics argue that Burrows was known to work with wood and create wooden artefacts in his spare time. Indeed. This they see as "evidence" that he faked the stones.

More importantly, there *is* evidence that a cave system exists where Burrows claims it exists. If it is all a hoax, the sceptics will need to provide evidence instead of repeatedly using the word "obvious".

Still, even if the cave system is there, it may perhaps be lost to us forever. Any operation that could be mounted to provide a conclusive answer would cost an extraordinary amount of money—and such resources are "obviously" not in the hands of the diffusionists.

So it seems that, once again, the establishment has won the fight—and that may be the only obvious thing about this entire story.

## From Old World to New?

What sense can we make of all this? Could a golden sarcophagus, allegedly found in an Illinois cave, be evidence of pre-Columbian transoceanic travel between the "Old World" and the Americas, as so many people have claimed?

While Burrows described what the cave looked like and what it contained, fortunately most of the artefacts removed from the cave were photographed early on, in part due to the efforts of James Schertz and Fred Rydholm. Various researchers have looked at this collection, and archaeologists have been quick to point out the mismatches.

But most cultures are a mismatch of cultures! London and New York are prime examples of how various cultures create a new one. Things were no different in ancient times, Alexandria probably being the best example.

An important clue is that some of the stone slabs displayed a signature that was known in the Old World. It belonged to one

Alexander Helios, son of the infamous Cleopatra and Marc Antony and twin brother of Cleopatra Selene, the future co-ruler of Mauritania (in Africa's western Sahara). This is the angle that Hubbard and Kelly built upon.

Amongst Burrows's earliest team of amateur researchers were Jack Ward and Warren Cook, the latter who died in 1989. Cook's analysis of the artefacts made him conclude that creating them would have taken thousands of hours. But more importantly, Cook continued Ward's analysis of their possible origin and argued that they were most likely the remains of a Libyan-Iberian expedition. He identified Mauritania's King Ptolemaeus I (1 BC – 40 AD), son of Cleopatra Selene and King Juba II (52-50 BC – 23 AD), as the man responsible for this transoceanic voyage. Could this have been possible?

The rulers of Mauritania had fallen foul of the Roman emperors, if only because of the economic power that Mauritania had become, turning the scales on who was in control of whom.

When the Roman Empire decided to redress that balance, the Mauritanian king Juba II and his family had to flee. It's possible that he used the knowledge of the seas that his ancestors, the Phoenicians, had gathered: he knew the location of the Azores, whose goods he was able to sell at the highest prices in Rome and elsewhere.

So, if the Burrows Cave artefacts are genuine and the interpretation correct, it's possible that the Phoenician-informed Mauritanian royal family sailed further west, beyond the Azores, to the Americas.

If they ended up in Central America, perhaps they entered the Mississippi River and travelled north until reaching Illinois—where they settled, far removed from the squabbles of the Old World.

The cave artefacts are not the only evidence of the presence of an enigmatic people in the first century AD. According to a local Native American legend, the region contains the tomb of a king who was not native to America. The tribe once knew the location, but this information is now lost. Could this location be the same as

**There is no evidence  
that Burrows faked  
the stones...**

**More importantly,  
there *is* evidence  
that a cave system  
exists where Burrows  
claims it exists.**

the Burrows Cave?

Furthermore, it is known that Juba II ordered a golden sarcophagus to be prepared for the mausoleum that had been built for him in Tipaza (in modern-day Algeria). This was one of the prized possessions that the Romans had tried to get their hands on, but they never did find the sarcophagus or the Mauritanian king. Official history is silent on the fate of both.

Yet it is clear that King Juba II must have died and that he and his sarcophagus must have ended up somewhere, perhaps in Illinois. That seems "obvious" logic to me—and logic may be all that we can work with for the foreseeable future.

## About the Author:

Philip Coppens has previously contributed five articles to NEXUS, the most recent being "The Quest for the Metal Library" (see vol. 13, no. 4).

His website is <http://www.philipcoppens.com>, and he can be contacted by email at [info@philipcoppens.com](mailto:info@philipcoppens.com).